

TO: Dan Ellsberg

FROM: Brian Jenkins

SUBJECT: IMMEDIATE REACTIONS TO DISCUSSION WITH JOHN VANN

Date: 7 August 1969

I assume that you will eventually include the remarks made by John Vann in your continuing series of Working Notes on Vietnam. Let me offer you some of my immediate reactions. I agree with a great deal of what Vann says and at the same time I believe in me. This may be puzzling since at the present time we seem to be saying opposite things and thinking in opposite directions. Judging by his former comments on Vietnam, John Vann has gone from less optimistic to more optimistic while I have gone from optimistic (December 1967) to optimistic providing changes were made (September 1968) to pessimistic as to the prospects of change (July 1969) with some residual optimism left over from 1967 that we might yet badly blunder through.

I am an advocate of the "sit-in" strategy, that is, a cheap stalemate that accomplishes the U.S. objective of preventing an enemy takeover. The "sit-in" strategy however, is dependent upon all of the following four things:

1. Agreement that the U.S. objective is preventing a communist takeover of South Vietnam, nothing more: one of the difficulties we confronted in the Long Range Planning Task Group was that there was, and still is, no agreement as to what our objectives were.

2. Having identified this as the objective - the formulation of a coherent strategy to reach it: no over-all strategy has been adopted yet. We entered the war *willy-nilly* and most likely will withdraw the same way.

3. The enunciation of that as our objective and our strategy to the American people whose support must be insured: this has never been done and there is no evidence that it will be done now. In fact, there is a considerable pressure against defining any objectives in Vietnam. Withdrawal alone is apparently our present objective. In withdrawing we could conceivably fall short of attaining any announced objective in Vietnam and, therefore, many consider it best that we do not define any objectives.

4. An orderly withdrawal that will leave in Vietnam a force properly structured to "sit-in," assist the Vietnamese in emergencies, and maintain a low American casualty rate: there is no evidence to suggest that our withdrawal from Vietnam will be based on logic in Vietnam rather than logic in Washington and that our tactics would be changed. Had we adopted the "fire brigade" concept of Vann, we could have long ago provided better security.



All of the four things mentioned would require that the institutions do things which they have not yet done. It would require changes, and the prospect of changes is dim. Proof: John Vann was in IV Corps arguing against the destructive tactics of General Julian Ewell. John Vann is still in IV Corps while General Ewell, who arrived in Vietnam with two stars, now has three and is the commander of the largest field force in Vietnam. General Eckhardt, who seemed more sympathetic to Vann's ideas arrived in country with two stars and left country with two stars. So much for change!

I would challenge some of the bases for Vann's optimism:

1. I would disagree with the choice of An Giang Province as an example of the hostile reaction of the Vietnamese peasants to the introduction of North Vietnamese regulars. About the only thing that An Giang Province could be used to demonstrate is - Gerry Hickey's accommodation thesis. An Giang is a Hoa Hao-controlled province that has been the most secure province in Vietnam for quite some time. At one time, it was one of the least secure provinces in South Vietnam. Nothing that the GVN did in An Giang, or the NVA might do there, can explain this dramatic change from least secure to most secure. It is a result of a decision by the Hoa Hao hierarchy to support the government of South Vietnam. As long as the government of South Vietnam looks as if it will survive, that decision is not likely to change and NVA troops entering An Giang Province are likely to be in trouble, however, if the NVA were to advance countrywide and the survivability of the GVN was in doubt, the Hoa Hao are quite capable of making a deal with the enemy and An Giang Province would revert from being the most secure to again being one of the least secure. Incidentally, have you seen the recent Peter Arnett article in which he asserts that it requires NVA regulars only about two to three months to completely blend in with the local population and operate as effectively as a Viet Cong guerrilla with only his North Vietnamese accent to identify him?

2. I would also disagree with Vann's opinion that only a slight difference in the balance of forces in Kien Giang Province was responsible for greatly increasing government control *even though the government forces did nothing but sit in their outposts*. As I recall the senior province adviser in Kien Giang was a Colonel Thornberry (or something like that), ex-Special Forces, who described to the Long Range Planning Group in May, the effective employment of the territorial forces in the province including increased night ambushes, cordons, and check points. While I would not maintain that effective government control requires great numbers of territorial forces I would argue that their mere presence in no way ensures government control. The critical difference is not numbers but effectiveness which does not have to be increased greatly, but still must be something more than sitting in outposts. Perhaps events province wide resulting from the increasing effectiveness of the Kien Giang territorial forces were responsible for the Viet Cong village chief's decision to rally to the government side.

3. The withdrawal of elements of the U.S. 9th Division from the



Delta will no doubt increase the physical security of the Vietnamese peasants. I cannot be quite so optimistic as Vann in believing that it will also result in an increase in security with regard to GVN control. The hamlet evaluation system measures security in terms of enemy-initiated incidents versus government control and does not reflect the number of civilian casualties caused by friendly operations. Some of the A and B hamlets will probably decline to C and D even though the peasants' life expectancy will increase. Although the 9th Division has not engaged in pacification that much, its trashing about has caused both the enemy and the peasants who can, to get out of the way while elements of the Vietnamese 7th Division have provided a modicum of security. Now that the enemy no longer has to worry about being *accidentally* shot at by the 9th, he can concentrate his efforts on the hamlets secured by the 7th which will probably result in at least a temporary decline in the security rating for those two provinces as reflected in the HES reports.

4. I noticed some inconsistencies in Vann's remarks concerning the reaction of the Vietnamese peasants in the Delta to the introduction of NVA regulars, the destructive responses made by the "friendlies," and the atrocities committed by some of the "friendlies." This no doubt reflects inconsistencies not in Vann's observations, but rather inconsistencies in the reactions of the Vietnamese peasants. For all our studies we still cannot predict with any certainty how these people will react or whether their initial reactions are the same as their reactions after several days, weeks, months, of thought.

I do fully agree with John Vann's description of how the military institution protects itself and how difficult it is to criticize in Vietnam anything that they do.

I enjoyed the discussion very much and want to thank you for extending the invitation to me. I hope the above comments will be of some value.

Brian Jenkins

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